

TIME TO WORK TOGETHER

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This Corona attack is the first major disaster to have ever affected all Indians, in all regions and of all classes, in our entire history. Wars, even the world wars or our three with Pakistan or China, have really never touched everyone everywhere as the fighting and deaths were at the frontline. So when Corona democratized death and respects neither privilege nor power, our panic is overwhelming. Our response must, therefore, display unity and resolve, but at the international level this is yet to emerge. The G 20 nations took many weeks to just come together.

India's Prime Minister has already made two dramatic public appearances to convey to his rather indisciplined citizenry that they must lock themselves at home to break the viscous cycle, while the lathis of State police forces make this clear to both the deserving and the innocent, rather unimaginatively. But then, one wonders why we took so much time after neighbouring China was being ravaged in January and the World Health Organisation had declared as early as on 30th January, that Corona was a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern'. WHO has specifically warned India every week, but PM's advisers and officials could not get the crisis registered in his busy mind. Delhi's response has not been speedy enough as it took several weeks of bickering to finalise the large scale procurement of even low technology products called PPE, personal protection equipment. This meant that while Narendra Modi spoke of the Kurukshetra War on Corona, his government was unable to supply adequate protection to medical staff and doctors actually engaged in the battle. Thus, State and private hospitals suffered all across the country and even now the supplies are inadequate. Then, while we clanged pots and pans or blew conches and rang bells in true Hindu style on 22nd March at 5 pm, doctors all over India cried for more testing kits. The scandalous delay in procuring these kits meant that India was not testing enough suspects and was perhaps under-reporting and under-playing the alarm. We can only pray that god forgives us and we do not face a sudden explosion of critical cases that we just cannot handle, as we do not have sufficient beds nor ventilators. This aspect cannot be ignored any more and contingency plans must be made to earmark public buildings for large scale evacuation, isolation and oxygen supply.

We know that not only did experts try to convince the national government, but the chief ministers of West Bengal and Kerala were especially active in drawing the prime minister's attention to speed up actions. Mamata Banerjee surely rose to the challenge with the spirit of a seasoned street fighter, when chief ministers like Yogi Adityanath were busy beating up protesters and in installing Ram Lalla to a makeshift mandir in Ayodhya. Even as a critical observer, one was impressed with the 'hands on' leadership she displayed by visiting every important hospital to build up morale and ensure proper arrangements. She even started drawing circles herself at market-places to demonstrate how customers are to maintain social distancing. Her directions and advisories made more sense, as they were from the battle-ground, unlike chief ministers or even the prime minister who depended more on reports from others. After all, in this age of a billion cameras, the credibility of leaders is adjudged by people on 24 x 7 basis, by visuals. Besides, someone has to contest much of the nonsense that Whatsapp universities are spreading faster than the virus, as they insist on making every person an MBBS in Corona control.

Even the financial package announced recently by India's finance minister also copies elements from initiatives undertaken by enterprising chief ministers within their limited means.

For instance, West Bengal started its insurance policy to cover medical staff combating the deadly disease and later, the Centre only increased the amounts of coverage. Similarly, schemes for free and subsidised food-grains announced by the Centre were actually launched by this State even earlier — to help the poor, unorganised strata that suffers the most when there is neither employment nor food. After all, a nation that has rice stocks of some 5 crore metric tons and almost 3 crore metric tons of wheat can feed the whole country at the basic level for more than a year, though quality and fair distribution are always problematic. West Bengal set up its State Disaster Relief Fund even before the Centre invoked this very law on 25th to declare its delayed nation-wide lock-down, without informing the States. It is strange that few in Delhi could not foresee the chaotic and pathetic migration of millions of labourers returning home, even though States had drawn attention to this. Banerjee was the first to demand that such movements that could spread virus and death be halted. The prime minister can rise further in the public esteem if he announces immediately certain special steps to feed inter-state migrants who are stranded jobless in other States. And, it is also time to grant funds to States that are actually commanding the batallions, without bringing in petty politics.

The manner in which we tackle this crisis will surely demonstrate whether we, as a people, and our social value structures are capable of responding effectively and surviving its onslaught. Societies that have suffered wars, plagues and other catastrophes at their very doorsteps in the past developed ‘fight-back-together’ codes in their DNA, but for India this is its first collective fiery ordeal.